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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity in the classroom provides the opportunity for children to learn about the customs, clothes, and languages of other countries. Various art forms offer a vehicle for boys and girls to communicate in nonverbal play. A "two-faced" happy-sad puppet provides a nonverbal means for very young or nonnative speaking children to indicate their feelings to teachers and peers. Puppets can become confidants of children who may have no other means of expression. Puppets are available to resemble the physical characteristics of different races and cultures, and can be dressed in international costumes. Water colors allow children to reproduce their inner state with a minimum of conversation, while music can capture the attention of students disinterested in their surroundings; both media can be used to overcome language barriers. Teachers, facilitators, and parents must be creative, spontaneous, and childlike to bring forth children's creativity. Members of cultures who live in a nonnative country do not always agree with the educational methods of their adopted country, and teachers need to be aware of such differences of opinion. Programs of art and music for young children have tremendous impact on ethnic groups who may, for once, feel accepted by their peers as they paint, dance, play an instrument, or play with puppets. (HTH)

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND CREATIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Although language may be a barrier to communication between nations, it rarely creates problems among children, whose creativity springs forth from a rich inner source that unites the children of the world.

Young people discover an ability to communicate with each other by drawing, pantomime, dancing, coloring, constructing paper mache masks or animals, and building cities with blocks and cardboard cartons. While they are enjoying the companionship of their young friends through gestures, modeling,pantomime, and simple words, adults have a much more difficult time of it. They are rarely as uninhibited as they were at ages three or five or seven, and may feel uncomfortable with another adult who doesn't speak or understand their language. Their discomfort is readily apparent in expression and body language, which varies from country to country.

Cultural diversity in the classroom provides the opportunity to learn about customs, clothes and language of other countries. The creativity of the teacher is necessary - indeed, crucial - to the successful integration of children of other cultures into the mainstream classroom. Fortunately, various art forms offer a vehicle for boys and girls to communicate in non-verbal play.

Very young children, or those who do not speak the language of their peers are often aided by a "two-faced puppet." This simple puppet has a happy face on one side and a sad one on the reverse, providing a non-verbal means of indicating his feelings to teachers and peers. It is not necessary to know the precise reason for his indication of sadness; often a warm hug and soft voice are satisfactory reassurances.

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The teacher or aide can rock a young child and sing to him until he is ready to join the class. This universal gesture of protection, love and understanding is comforting to children of all nations. Words are not necessary to show feelings of concern.

Since the days of Punch and Judy, puppetry has been a popular means of conveying morals, legends, and folklore. Today, the concerns of the world's children are more diverse: abuse, divorce, Alzheimer's Disease, lying, cheating, and death. Puppets are non-judgmental and speak only when spoken through; they become confidants of children who may have no other means of expression. When sensitive topics are addressed through the "fun" of a puppet show, or the "game" of playing with a therapist, children readily identify with the characters in the story and share their experiences with others. Such disclosures may alleviate a persistent or dangerous problem or prevent a life-threatening situation, such as promiscuous sex or drugs. Puppet shows in classrooms where some students are unable to understand the language are as enthusiastically received by all children, whether or not the words are understood.

Puppets are available to resemble light or dark skinned people, Oriental, Hispanic and American Indian cultures, adding to the discussion or lessonplans. Using these puppets, children are able to role play; using puppets of different cultures encourages them to ask questions and establish dialogue with others. These puppets can be dressed in national costumes and be part of a day's program on cultural diversity.

Water colors fascinate children for their ability to run together and form new colors or images. Children who like to paint are comfortable with their ability to reproduce their inner state through color. Other than, "Look at what I did!" conversation is at a minimum when a child is intent on creating a part of himself on paper. Words are not necessary when involved in this activity. Once a child is

familiar with painting, he needs no verbal instruction to apply the paint to paper. Children admire each others' work by exclamation, facial expression, and spontaneous touch.

That children learn more readily when soft-preferably classical music is played as background is so often proven as to be accepted as fact. Autistic children may respond to a question posed in song while ignoring one asked in a normal speaking voice. Music is an established method of reaching "hard to reach" children when other methods fail. Many simple musical games are universal in scope and entered into with abandon by culturally diverse children who may not understand the words.

Youngsters who appear disinterested in their surroundings often register interest when music is played, and in time may participate in playing an instrument, i.e. drum, cymbal, xylophone, piano. Again, the language barrier ceases to exist as verbal communication, other than sincere praise and encouragement, is unnecessary.

Creativity is not limited to people with intelligence. Some of the most creative individuals would not be considered intelligent, and many mentally challenged children and adults have created beautiful and intricate works of art. Unless a teacher, facilitator, or parent is creative, spontaneous, and child-like, she will be unable to bring that quality forth from the children with whom she is entrusted. An adult who is so crystallized and inflexible that deviation from diagrams, instructions, or a lesson plan brings inner chaos cannot effectively communicate with a young child who is fascinated with ants on the desk, dogs barking outside, a scrap of paper on the floor, or a mole on his arm, all of which are explored in a period of 30 seconds. Curiosity knows no social or cultural boundries.

Children see the miracle of life in everything. Their lives, their environment, their friends and their day dreams are of endless fascination to them. It does not follow that the lives, friends,

environment, and day dreams of children in the Far East are similar to those in the United States or England.

From birth to about age five, boys and girls are allowed to follow their imagination and to explore their bodies and surroundings. Suddenly, at five or six, this is no longer encouraged; they are thrust into a "hostile" environment, much like their birth a few short years before. They are no longer free to roam, to question, to create on their own. Instead, they are regimented and inundated with rules and facts. Their creativity is slowly being obfuscated by premature introduction to rote and electronics. Not all cultures agree with the educational methods of their "adopted" country, and teachers need to be aware of such differences of opinion and traditional schooling.

If the children of today are to evolve into the leaders of tomorrow, adults must realize their responsibility for bringing this blossoming seed to fruition. This responsibility seems overwhelming at times, so much so that increasing numbers of adults are flocking to therapists who use classical music, art, and puppetry to help their clients better understand the child within that is crying for release. Stifling creativity and not understanding others' points of view and culture is a dangerous, but not uncommon occurence. It sets the stage for manipulation and development of people who are unable to imaging the outcome of events, who have relinquished their will and who have lost touch with their childlike qualities and joy of living. In this time of limited funding, many schools have removed or drastically reduced arts-based programs. Parents are protesting this cut-back, proclaiming the value of art and music for young children. They may not be aware, however, of the tremendous impact these programs have on ethnic groups who may - for once - feel accepted by their peers as they paint, dance, play an instrument, or play with puppets.

As teachers, consultants, and parents, it is our duty to help the children of the world achieve their optimal potential and one of the most effective methods is through exposure to and participation in all areas of art - the universal equalizer.

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